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ABSTRACT

The speaker challenges his audience to devise imaginative and effective means of obtaining for children ready-access to books that will help them develop an image of the future worthy of the previously undreamed-of capability, health, and welfare enjoyed at the present time. It is up to the present generation, he says, to help children achieve the kind of manhood and the kind of world they desire. The special relationship between a child and literature is described as one which fosters awareness. The child should not be shielded from knowledge but must have free access to opportunity. (NH)

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND CONTEMPORARY IMPERATIVES: A SCHOOL OF NOT-SO-HARD KNOCKS

I am deeply honored and pleased by your kind invitation for me to share with you today some thoughts about children's literature and the challenges that confront us today as lovers of children and books.

Ability to make use of the written word is a minimal requirement for control of personal destiny in this country. The American Dream comes true only for those who read. Only those who can read are able to earn enough money to share in America's affluence. Only those who do read find the inspiration that lets them share in American ingeniousness. Society's rewards go to the literate, and children's books are the point of take-off for literacy.

The world of every child is circumscribed. Children are small and dependent. Some children are sick and underfed and dependent on tragically inept and impoverished parents. The broadened horizons visible through books are especially important for children. It is a tragedy, pure and simple, that millions of underprivileged youngsters in this country have never been inside a public library. It is a disaster that up to one half of students in city schools read far below expectations and are virtually helpless before the printed page.

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Reading frees and feeds the mind, whether the printed matter is a first-grade primer or a sewing machine instruction

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Remarks by Joseph H. Douglass, Ph.D., before the International Reading Association-Children's Book Council Joint Committee, Fifteenth Annual Convention of the International Reading Association, Anaheim, California, May 7, 1970.

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manual. Fate limits in space and time the experience each individual has in life, but books take the reader beyond these limits to places he will never see in centuries past or to come.

When a Child Reads

A little girl sits in a treehouse and reads about Nancy Drew or the Black Stallion or Lassie. She goes with a flash light to sit in a closet and read about secret gardens and desert islands--not because she must hide from disapproving eyes, but to be alone with her book, to venture forth. She is the seeker, the explorer. The rapt listener to voices that rise from worlds far beyond the backyards and sidewalks and playmates close at hand.

Reading is a way of knowing. Long before the first teenage boy holds her hand on a date, she will read about divorce and marriage and true love--in the Reader's Digest, in dimestore thrillers, in her mother's Book Club novels. Long before the first threatening figure looms before her on a dark night, she will read of murder and crime. She will read about astronauts and teacher's pets and sexpots and villains. She will know good and evil, deceit and honor, success and failure, happiness and misery, death and resurrection. She will know about being liked and being hated.

No one book teaches her any of these things, but many books together teach her a great deal about all of them. Reading is a way of knowing. If the little girl lives to be eighty-five, she will probably never experience directly as much as she learns from books during those years of childhood

when the hours are hers to read and wander page after page through the libraries of home and school and drugstore.

Literature is Real

Life makes many demands, and there are many ways of dealing with them. Among those who feel life most strongly are those who are moved to write, those who are inspired to tell what they know and express what they feel to others. Books are a way of knowing the universally shared pain and joy of the human situation, of knowing the many, many lifestyles and life solutions that exist, in fact or fancy, and are respected or reviled in various contexts.

Melodrama is real. Fantasy is real. Imagination is real. Not because they are realistic but because they are human creations that survive the ages, often changing, often expressed in different ways, but always the same. These things endure. They are real in the same sense books are real. They are true not because they are accurate or even because they are honest, but because they are expressions of human-ness, of humanity in all its humane and inhumane mutations.

Patterns, forms, characters, themes, and ideas repeat themselves in literature. Consider, for instance, the similarities in children's fairy tales throughout the ages and around the world. Myths converge so often that the fundamental reality of literature cannot be denied.

The child who dips into the well of literature touches on the eternal and enters into communion with the universal consciousness that pervades all human experience. Whether

books are good or bad--serious or funny--high-minded or trashy--makes no difference at all in one way, but at the same time makes all the difference.

Censorship: Yes or No

Children read a lot of trash. Although many excellent books are available, much that they read is superficial, unrealistic, and biased. I am a firm believer that we do not need to protect our children as much as some have suggested from the pernicious effects of so-called "bad" books. Children take what they read in the context of their total understanding. It would take many, many very bad books to warp the mind of the average young reader.

It is a fact that we cannot fully protect any child from ugliness, for ugliness exists in the real world as well as in books. We owe it to our children, however, to expose them to the best books our culture has to offer. If they know the best, they are safe from the worst. It is the child with limited exposure who is sometimes damaged by smut, violence, and wrong-headedness he may stumble upon or have access to from time to time.

Literature can mobilize fears and heighten insecurity, but books have only a secondary effect when this happens. The primary problems--the ones to be dealt with firmly and in an organized way--stem from unhappy home life and other unfortunate circumstances that create basic emotional disturbance in a child.

The Book Isn't Everything

Norman Cousins points out that books are part of life not a substitute for it. Books lose their charm and much of their value when they are accepted uncritically--or when writers and publishers assume they will be accepted uncritically and try to make books "perfect" in every respect. Some of us in close contact with the world of books may take ourselves too seriously. Cousins points out that we do neither service nor justice to books by imposing upon them omnipotence and omniscience. Too often we make books so "good for people" that you can't blame them--especially the younger people--if they would rather die than read. (Norman Cousins: "The Book Isn't Everything" (editorial), Saturday Review, 3/8/52)

Books are important not only by virtue of ideational content but because of their power to inspire better ideas than they contain. Books broaden a child's data base. The child adopts what fits usefully into his thinking patterns. He remembers those things that stir the prior emotional and intellectual patterns he brings to his reading.

Children's literature should be like children: life-loving, full of energy and mischievousness. It should not always preach a moral. It should not always be weighted down with didactic significance. Children have a sense of wonder and a love of the marvelous. They are tuned-in to the joy, excitement and mystery of the world.

Maturity comes when a child gains ability to function successfully on his own. Books provide a school of not-so-hard knocks. The young reader goes alone, but is accompanied unobtrusively by the author and sheltered discreetly by the covers of the book, which can be closed if the unexpected threatens to overwhelm.

The suspension of disbelief is especially easy for the young. They open themselves with less effort because they are open, because they are not restricted by fixed ideas, vested interests, and dogma. In a book it is safe for them to be kings or thieves or movie stars. They experience the joys and hardships and fears, but they can withdraw when they need to. They are not forced to live out the consequences of unwise choices of lifestyle. They are not forced to pay the prices exacted for action in person in the real world. Books provide a setting in which youngsters can experiment freely with attitudes and values.

Contemporary Crises.

What I have been saying about the experiences a child can have through books all leads up to this point: in this day and age, when inter-group tension threatens to rent our society asunder, when urban violence and decay threaten to empty our cities of all citizens who can afford to live elsewhere, when pollution and over-population threaten to make this planet uninhabitable, when Americans of all ages appear to be experiencing "identity crises" in various forms, it is critical that our children be exposed to the felt realities

of everyday conditions that give rise to present difficulties. This exposure should come at as early an age as possible--by any and all means--while ideas and attitudes are still in formative stages.

As a concommitant particularly of vastly sweeping and rapid technological and social changes, I believe we as a total society are undergoing immense introspection in our efforts to develop a definition of the human situation for our time. There is little question, for example, that many aspects of especially the technological revolution tend to depress individuality or "personhood." The self-definition of the individual in the contexts of the interpretation of his interpersonal and social responsibility and moral purpose accordingly become increasingly difficult to assess.

Under many conditions existing in the United States today, the child must be recognized as the vulnerable Achilles heel of our society. The child is the target of many unseen, unverbalized, and contradictory forces that push and pull him. Accordingly, many young persons, as well as older ones, are experiencing bewildering frustration, anxiety, and insecurity in the effort to determine personal relevance.

Violence

Consider, for instance, violence. It has been said that violence is as American as cherry pie. It sells books and magazines as well as movies and television advertising time. It sells children's books--especially comic books. Little girls as well as little boys love to imagine they are Superman, crashing through brick walls and incinerating their enemies with X-ray vision.

It has been observed that preschool children as well as their older playmates love to tell stories with an amazing predominance of themes of aggression. They are enthralled by tales of calamity--some ending with the healing touch of bandaids or mother--others ending in unresolved chaos. These stories do not aggravate anxieties in young listeners, but it is significant that toddlers so often dwell on darker emotions. (E.G. Pitcher: Values and Issues in Young Children's Literature; Elementary English, March 1969, pp. 287-294.)

I believe children's books can make good use of this natural fascination with violence and aggression. What is involved apparently is youthful experimentation with means of coping. Books can help in the vital effort to begin in early childhood to root out the basis for the need to hate and lash out and destroy. For instance, books can reinforce non-violence as a glamorous, exciting, admirable, and effective way of behaving. Occasionally the good guy should win the girl through kindness. Occasionally the crook should be caught by because the sleuth is intelligent rather than tough. The feelings of the victims of violence should be portrayed.

It is important that violence be placed in context--recognized as the effective method it sometimes unfortunately is and also as the self-defeating tragedy it always is regardless of what apparently desirable results may accompany it.

Dr. Frederic Wertham points out that "Children have an inborn capacity for sympathy. But that sympathy has to be cultivated. This is one of the most delicate points in the educational process." We must expose children systematically

to the peaceable attitudes, actions, and individuals that find success in this society--from time to time, at various levels of accomplishment, with varied degrees of fanfare and adulation.

Inter-Racial Tension

Children, with their open hearts, can overcome many of the "hang-ups" that stymie adults. Honest portrayal of the realities and causes of racial hatreds, for instance, will call forth a child's natural sense of justice. In this way, important strides can be made toward more equitable and reasonable attitudes and practices for the future.

In America, many persons feel that the current state of affairs between whites and blacks is much more serious than ever before. At the heart of white racism is the "conviction" or doctrine that merely being Caucasian is preferable to any and all other states of existence and that all other racial and ethnic groups are inferior to whites. Black racism, in turn, rejects white values and white acceptance. The increasing danger of the present period is that it is now most difficult for blacks and whites to communicate.

To reverse this dangerous trend, it is not enough simply to add black history and other racial facts to texts and other kinds of books that children read. Neither is it enough to explain that once there was slavery and now the slaves are free or that some children are black and some white because God made them that way. Similarly, it is

not enough to explain that some people don't like Chinese people and won't hire them or that some people don't like Spanish-Americans and won't live next door to them.

What might be enough would be for children to feel and experience what it is really like to be black or Chinese or Spanish-American--or for that matter to be poor or Methodist or rich or crippled. Only if experiences are really shared will understanding be developed that is anywhere near adequate to erase intergroup tensions that imperil us all.

Books for older children can explore racial and other socio-politico-economic issues very directly. Books for younger children must approach these topics with language and concepts appropriate to beginning readers. Although young children have limited ability to deal with verbal concepts, they have tremendous capacity for emotional experience.

Books effectively convey to readers of all ages what it is like to be a mountainclimber. They can be equally effective in conveying what it is like to be a black sharecropper from the Deep South on the day he arrives in New York City and moves into a Harlem tenement with his first welfare check in hand and the rats rustling in the closets. Difficulties of biracial friendship, housing discrimination, white hostility, black militancy, and the historical basis for de facto segregation can all be explored and dramatized on the printed page. Happily, some very practical ideas along these lines are now being put into effect.

In word and deed, in print and in everyday activities, we must dare to resolve to steadfastly live by the proposition that all human beings are inherently worthy. There is little need to stress how very important this is for little children in terms of the wholesome development of the innermost core of their ego identity and their self-imagery throughout life.

Shared Experience: Books and Libraries

We have seen too clearly the difficulties of sharing intergroup experience by integrating racial, social and economic groups in neighborhoods, schools, and places of employment. The monumental barriers encountered in these enterprises do not need to affect shared access to a common heritage of books. Books are an easy way to share. Even a small amount of common-sense planning can easily create a library where children can find materials that will let them sample different life styles.

Many people question whether or not libraries should be a force for social change. Many argue that libraries are repositories of timeless knowledge and beauty and should not become involved in contemporary controversy and conflict.

I disagree. The printed word is for the purpose of communication. Any document--be it pamphlet, memo, novel, or encyclopedia--is no more than an intermediary between author and reader. Libraries are guardians of collected communications. Communication is their business--their primary and only business. Books are written to be read, and if libraries are to honor

their responsibilities as keepers of books, they must act to create accessible, attractive, conducive settings in which books are read--read aloud, read in part or in whole, read by individuals and groups, in the library and outside it. If libraries are to be more than exchange stations or dispensaries of facts, there must be a magnificant invasion of our libraries by the public.

What is read affects what is thought and done by the readers. Libraries do have social impact. Willing or not, they are socially active. If a library has no books on black history, the community that library serves will not easily become aware of the background, for instance, of the black power movement. History exists only in books. This is one area in which libraries clearly must accept a primary responsibility and must make socially responsible decisions regarding purchase and display of materials.

Fostering Awareness

Words--books and other word forms--do shape public opinion. This is why books have been burned and censored throughout the ages. We do not burn books in America, but libraries, publishers, and other power figures in the book establishment are guilty of sins equally as reprehensible as book-burning if they do not make available to the reading public of all ages materials that reflect the full range of thought, opinion, and experience in this country--and for that matter throughout the world.

What must be fostered in our children is awareness. No one is better off for having been shielded from knowledge of

any kind. Freedom is based on the premise that one of the God-given rights of every human being is full and equal access to opportunity--this means opportunity to read as well as to pursue happiness in other ways.

If more of today's teenagers had read about hippies, drugs, and radicalism, they might not be so eager to experiment with these lifestyles. Even the most glamorized account of patently undesirable activity necessarily reveals the basic values that create the glamor. If these values are deficient--as, for instance, I believe are the values on which the "drug life" is predicated--this shows and young readers as well as older ones learn.

The type of moral leadership required in many contexts is sometimes not dramatically in evidence on an official level, in youthful peer groups, or at home. This places special responsibility and opportunity before books and other elements of our culture that deal with the life of the mind.

Shaping An Image of the Future

Pierre Bertaux suggests that for the first time in history man has reached the point where he can transform to reality whatever image of the future he adopts. Bertaux says, "If we admit that the image of the future can be effectively introduced as an efficient...element in the chain of causality; if we further admit that our image of the future is in some way and to some extent our own choice and responsibility; then we have here not only a way of reconciling our belief in determinism and our belief in freedom, but also a direct

I believe the challenge to the group gathered here today is to devise imaginative and effective means of obtaining for our children ready access to books that will help them develop an image of the future worthy of the previously undreamed of capability and health and welfare we enjoy at the present time. We have the means to live long and live well, to live in peace with our neighbors and in harmony with ourselves. What is needed is imagination and resolve to cope creatively and wisely with situations in which we have placed ourselves.

This task will fall, in the very near future, to our children. To consider the child as the father of the man is to proceed on the belief that man can become only the composite of all his past experiences. It also assumes that society--to some extent--selectively can choose the values it wishes to instill in its children, and, in effect, that we possess the ability, the wisdom, and the resources to predetermine the types of men and women our society will require in the years ahead.

The crux is, as Eric Hoffer suggests, that each generation must humanize itself--in terms of the cultural milieu that in many ways is unique to each generation. There is no more intrinsically humanizing experience than to read a good book. Books are not tied irrevocably to the times and tastes that produce them. Books are dynamic, catalytic, engendering. Books call forth the type of imagination--the type of "imaging"--through which man creates himself and relates to his fellow men and his environment. I believe that the child is truly

the father of the man and that the man, in turn, fathers the world he lives in. It is up to us as book-lovers to help children achieve the kind of manhood and the kind of world they desire.

Thank you.